

CHAPTER 4: ROMAN HOUSING

INTRODUCTION

There were almost as many types of houses and living quarters in ancient Rome as there are in America today. Although region and setting played an important role in determining style and form, there were three basic types of Roman dwellings: *domus*, *insula*, and *villa*. Whereas the *domus* was a detached or semi-detached town house, the *insula* was an apartment or tenement building. The size and quality of each structure varied enormously, as, of course, did its decoration. This chapter will concentrate on the two types of urban dwellings characteristic of the city of Rome, the *domus* and the *insula*. The *villa* was a rural homestead and will be discussed in a later chapter.

ROOMS OF A ROMAN HOUSE

The *atrium*, the first room one entered, was a reception room. It was here that the master and mistress of the house greeted and welcomed their guests. Its two most conspicuous features were the *compluvium* and the *impluvium*. The *compluvium* was a rectangular opening in the roof designed to admit light and air and to channel rainwater into the *impluvium*, the pool below.

The *tablinum* was the master's den or office. Here he kept the important papers and documents pertaining to the household. The *tablinum* normally opened onto an internal, open-air garden surrounded by a sheltered and colonnaded walkway called the *peristylum*.

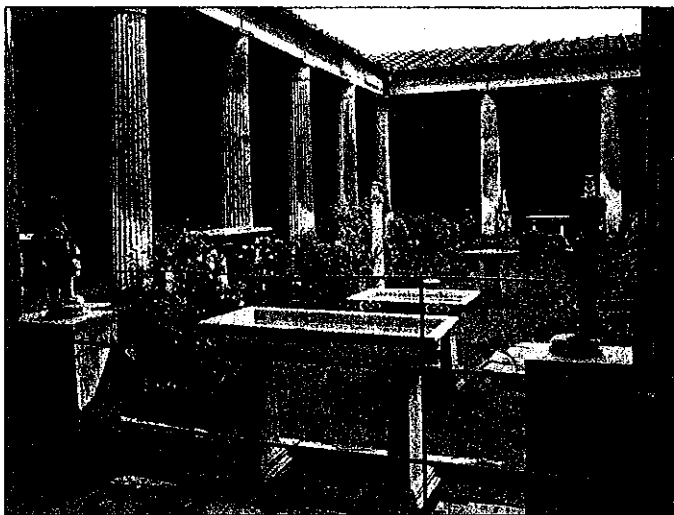


Fig. 13.
This *peristylum*, a colonnaded garden, is in a Roman house in Pompeii.

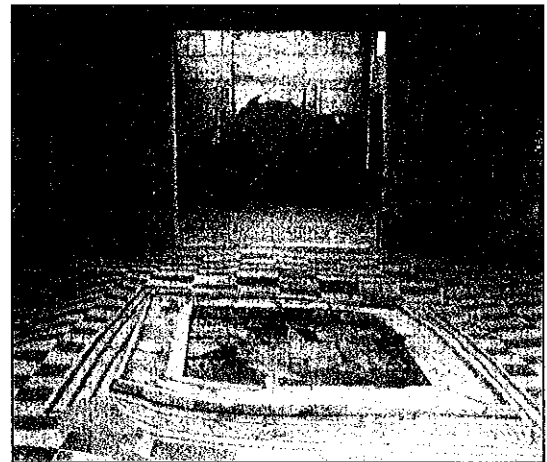


Fig. 12.
An opening in the roof was above the shallow pool in the middle of the atrium of this house in Herculaneum.

Protected from sun or rain, family members and guests could sit or stroll and enjoy the well-tended plants and flowers in the central garden.

Food was prepared in a kitchen called the *culina*. Since slaves prepared the meals, the *culina* was strictly a functional workroom with an open hearth and a charcoal stove. It was not elaborately decorated. Slaves served meals in a formal dining room called a *triclinium*. Romans dined on sloping couches positioned around three sides of a small table on which pre-cut, bite-sized pieces of

food were placed on serving dishes. Typically, each couch was designed to accommodate three diners, for a total of nine reclining diners. Larger houses frequently contained more than one *triclinium*. Because Romans also enjoyed dining in the open air, a portion of the *peristylum* was often reserved for outdoor meals.

A bedroom was called a *cubiculum* and each was small and simply furnished. Oftentimes a sleeping couch was set into an alcove. Occasionally a small space adjacent to the *cubiculum* offered a place for a slave to wait on call.

Roman houses also included such rooms and features as a *bibliotheca*, or library, where scrolls were kept in pigeonholed shelving along the walls. Some houses had a *vestibulum* (sometimes called *fauces*), an entryway between the street and the *atrium*. Here clients waited to greet their patron as he left his house in the morning, and here those participating in ritual processions for ceremonies such as coming-of-age ceremonies, funerals, or weddings assembled. Some of the more extravagant private homes had a *latrina*, or toilet. This was typically a small and simple "bench" under which running water flowed to remove the waste.

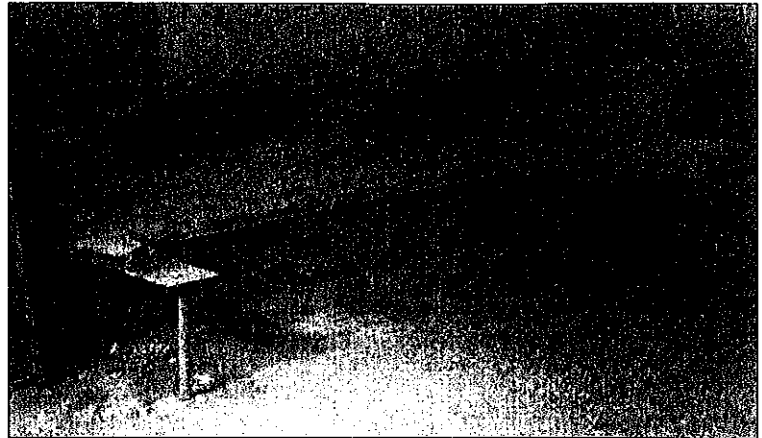


Fig. 14.
The heat of the volcanic eruption carbonized this sleeping couch in Herculaneum. It would have been covered with cushions and pillows in ancient times.

THE DOMUS

A *domus* was a home for the wealthy. It was usually devoid of external ornamentation, but elaborately decorated within. Street frontage was regularly rented out as shops.

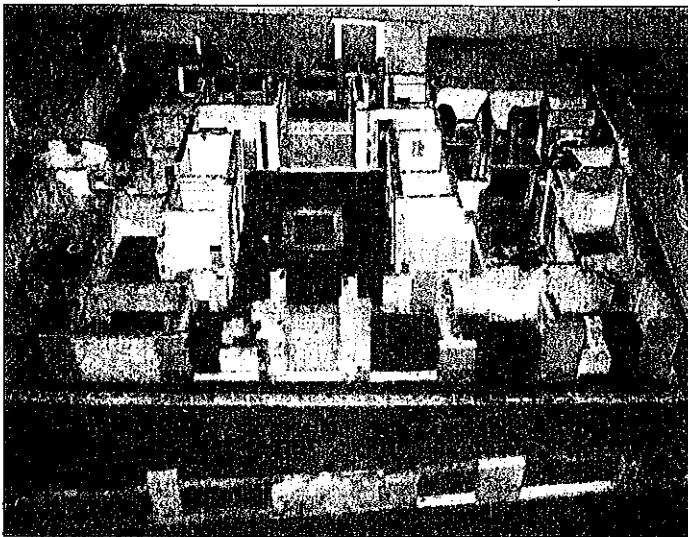


Fig. 15.
This model of the remains of a house in Pompeii shows the typical layout of an atrium-style house.

The arrangement of rooms in the *domus* provided for a healthy circulation of fresh air and an abundance of light from the *atrium* and the *peristylum* to the other rooms of the house. The very strong axis or straight path through the *vestibulum*, *atrium*, and *tablinum* is a consistent feature of nearly every *domus*. Sometimes a *triclinium* was also located near this axis. Because these were public spaces where visitors were received and entertained, the rooms were lavishly decorated with frescoes, mosaics, statuary, and fountains. It was important to a Roman homeowner to impress callers. The rooms in the remaining area of the *domus*, intended for private use by the family, showed far more variety in their arrangement and decoration.

THE *INSULA*

Since space in the city was scarce and expensive, it is not surprising that multi-story, multi-family apartment buildings called *insulae* sprang up in Rome. In fact, the majority of Romans lived in *insulae*. These structures could be six or seven stories tall. As a precaution against fire, a 60-foot height limit was imposed on their construction.



Fig. 16.
This large *insula*, known as the "House of Diana," occupied an entire block in the Roman seaport of Ostia (see Fig. 18).

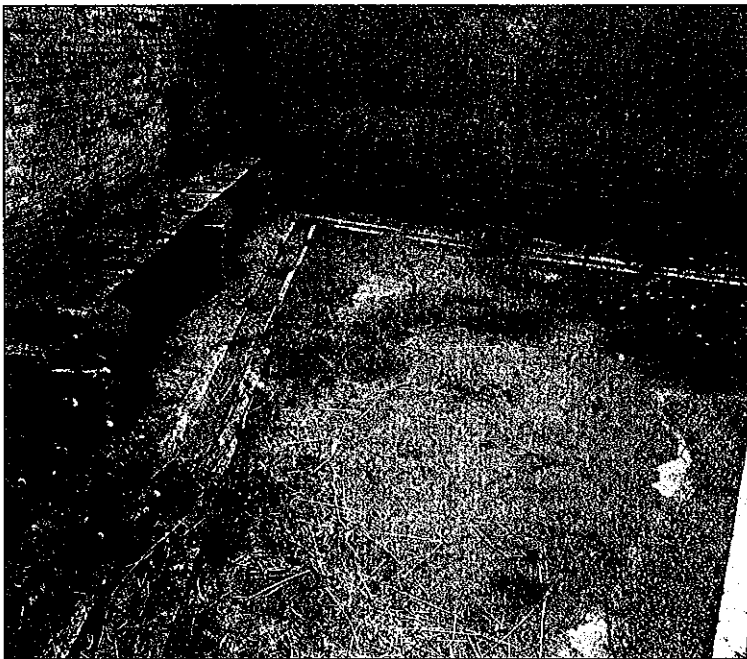


Fig. 17.
These are the remains of benches in a latrine at Ostia. There were separate facilities for men and women, but no individual cubicles for privacy.

Insulae were built around a central courtyard that provided light and air to the interior units. The ground floor contained shops and sometimes a source of water for cooking and cleaning, and perhaps a *latrina*. Choice units were those on the ground floor, since they provided easy access to water and did not require a long climb. Apartments on the upper stories, reached by steep flights of stairs and prone to the dangers of fire from chimneys, were the least desirable.

Most of the tenants of *insulae* were not members of upper-class society, but neither were they necessarily poor. There was probably a wide spectrum of *insulae*, ranging from the quite comfortable dwellings to buildings that were not well equipped and rather dilapidated.

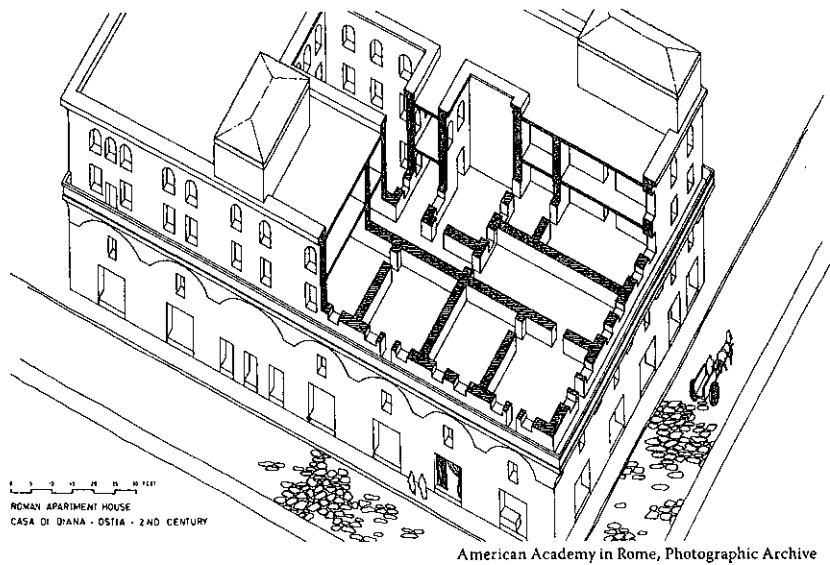


Fig. 18.
Above is a diagram of House of Diana in Ostia (see Fig. 16).

HOUSEHOLD GODS

Almost every Roman house or apartment featured a family shrine. Sometimes a shrine was located in a small niche in a wall, or sometimes it was a freestanding structure. Shrines were placed in many parts of the house, although usually in private spaces. Among other deities, Romans worshipped distinctive gods known as *Lares* and *Penates*, the guardian spirits who protected the welfare and prosperity of each Roman family and its possessions. Many small bronze statuettes of *Lares* have survived. *Penates*, however, who were worshipped at hearth fires and whose specific concern was the family's food supply, were not depicted.

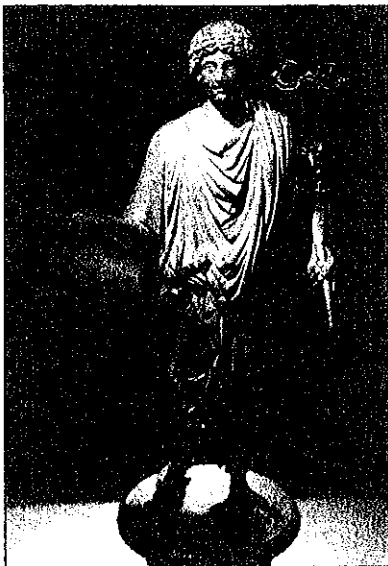


Fig. 19.
The *Lar Familiaris*, worshipped as a protective spirit of the *familia*, was dressed in a simple tunic and carried a cornucopia and a *patera* or dish used in sacrifices.

FURNITURE AND DECORATION

Because only a few examples of Roman furniture have survived from antiquity, wall paintings are our best source of information about Roman décor. Three-legged tables were popular, probably due to their stability on uneven mosaic floors. Cupboards, boxes, and chests, similar in design to their modern counterparts, were common. Chairs, with and without arms, stools, some of which were collapsible, and simple benches provided seating. Sleeping beds and lounging couches, similar in form to each other, were cushioned with mattresses and liberally strewn with pillows.

Upper-class houses were decorated with elaborate frescoes, or wall paintings, and floor mosaics, but also featured movable carved or painted screens and tapestries. The prevalence of live plants and bowls of fruit in wall paintings may indicate that Romans accessorized with fruit and foliage.

Because interior decoration was costly, slave quarters and the living spaces of the lower classes were usually quite plain and monochromatic.

Chapter 4 Exercises: *Roman Housing*

N.B.

Many of the terms used in this chapter are Latin words. In Latin, singular words ending in *-um* form their plural in *-a*, and singular words ending in *-a* form their plural in *-ae*. So, *cubiculum* (bedroom) is singular, but *cubicula* (bedrooms) is plural. Similarly, *latrina* (toilet) is singular, but *latrinae* (toilets) is plural.

FILL IN THE BLANKS

Use the following word bank to fill in the blanks:

| | | | |
|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| <i>peristylum</i> | <i>atrium</i> | <i>compluvium</i> | <i>tablinum</i> |
| <i>impluvium</i> | <i>culina</i> | <i>cubiculum</i> | <i>latrina</i> |
| <i>triclinium</i> | <i>bibliotheca</i> | <i>vestibulum</i> | <i>fauces</i> |

1. The sparsely furnished sleeping room was called the _____.
2. Important documents and records were kept in the _____.
3. The decorative interior pool located near the entrance of the house was called the _____.
4. In this workroom, known as the _____, slaves prepared the food.
5. Some houses had a room with scrolls shelved along the walls called a _____.
6. Through a system of drainage spouts, rainwater was directed from the _____ to the pool below.
7. Some Roman houses had a private facility for disposing of human waste material called a _____.
8. To sit, chat, and enjoy the garden, Romans spent time in the _____.
9. Romans arranged dining couches around a small table in the _____.
10. The room that contained both the *compluvium* and the *impluvium* was the _____.
11. The _____ (sometimes called _____) was an entryway between the street and the *atrium* where visitors waited and those participating in ceremonies assembled.